DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 301 361 PS 017 707

AUTHOR Genishi, Celia
TITLE Young Children's Oral Language Development. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana, Ill.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO PS-4-1988
PUB DATE 88
CONTRACT RI-88-062012
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Language Acquisition; *Oral Language; *Teacher Role; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest presents an overview of the process and mechanics of language development, along with implications for practice. Sections of the discussion focus on: (1) when and how language is learned; (2) oral language components; and (3) nurturing language development. It is argued that teachers can help sustain natural language development by providing environments full of language opportunities. General guidelines for teachers, parents, and other caregivers include: (1) understand that every child's dialect is worthy of respect as a valid system for communication; (2) treat children as if they were conversationalists, even if they are not yet talking; (3) encourage interaction among children; (4) remember that parents, caregivers, teachers, and guardians are the chief resources in language development; and (5) continue to encourage interaction as children come to understand written language. (RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED301361

ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
University of Illinois
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue
Urbana, Illinois 61801
(217) 333-1386

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC Digest

PS-4-1988

Young Children's Oral Language Development

Celia Genishi

The development of oral language is one of the child's most natural—and impressive—accomplishments. This digest presents an overview of the process and mechanics of language development, along with implications for practice.

When and How Language Is Learned

Almost all children learn the rules of their language at an early age through use, and over time, without formal instruction. Thus one source for learning must be genetic. Humans beings are born to speak; they have an innate gift for figuring out the rules of the language used in their environment. The environment itself is also a significant factor. Children learn the specific variety of language (dialect) that the important people around them speak.

Children do not, however, learn only by imitating those around them. We know that children work through linguistic rules on their own because they use forms that adults never use, such as "I goed there before" or "I see your feets." Children eventually learn the conventional forms, *went* and *feet*, as they sort out for themselves the exceptions to the rules of English syntax. As with learning to walk, learning to talk requires time for development and practice in everyday situations. Constant correction of a child's speech is usually unproductive.

Children seem born not just to speak, but also to interact socially. Even before they use words, they use cries and gestures to convey meaning; they often understand the meanings that others convey. The point of learning language and interacting socially, then, is not to master rules, but to make connections with other people and to make sense of experiences (Wells, 1986). In summary, language occurs through an interaction among genes (which hold innate tendencies to communicate and be sociable), environment, and the child's own thinking abilities.

When children develop abilities is always a difficult question to answer. In general, children say their first words between 12 and 18 months of age. They begin to use complex sentences by the age of 4 to 4 1/2 years. By the time they start kindergarten, children know most of the fundamentals of their language, so that they are able to converse easily with someone who speaks as they do (that is, in their dialect). As with other aspects of development, language acquisition is not predictable. One child may say her first word at 10 months, another at 20 months. One child may use complex sentences at 5 1/2 years, another at 3 years.

Oral Language Components

Oral language, the complex system that relates sounds to meanings, is made up of three components: the phonological, semantic, and syntactic (Lindfors, 1987). The phonological component involves the rules for combining sounds. Speakers of English, for example, know that an English word can end, but not begin, with an *-ng* sound. We are not aware of our knowledge of these rules, but our ability to understand and pronounce English words demonstrates that we do know a vast number of rules.

The semantic component is made up of morphemes, the smallest units of meaning that may be combined with each other to make up words (for example, *paper* + *s* are the two morphemes that make up *papers*), and sentences (Brown, 1973). A dictionary contains the semantic component of a language, and reflects not just what words make up that language, but also what words (and meanings) are important to the speakers of the language.

The syntactic component consists of the rules that enable us to combine morphemes into sentences. As soon as a child uses two morphemes together, as in "more cracker," she is using a syntactic rule about how morphemes are combined to convey meaning. Like the rules making up the other components, syntactic rules become increasingly complex as the child develops. From combining two morphemes, the child goes on to combine words with suffixes or inflections (*-s* or *-ing*, as in *papers* and *eating*) and eventually creates questions, statements, commands, etc. She also learns to combine two ideas into one complex sentence, as in "I'll share my crackers if you share your juice."

Of course speakers of a language constantly use these three components of language together, usually in social situations. Some language experts would add a fourth component: pragmatics, which deals with rules of language use. Pragmatic rules are part of our communicative

PS 017 707

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Celia Genishi
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

competence, our ability to speak appropriately in different situations, for example, in a conversational way at home and in a more formal way at a job interview. Young children need to learn the ways of speaking in the day care center or school where, for example, teachers often ask rhetorical questions. Learning pragmatic rules is as important as learning the rules of the other components of language since people are perceived and judged based on both what they say and how and when they say it.

Nurturing Language Development

Parents and caregivers need to remember that language in the great majority of individuals develops very efficiently. Adults should try not to focus on "problems," such as the inability to pronounce words as adults do (for example, when children pronounce r's like w's). Most children naturally outgrow such things, which are a tiny segment of the child's total repertoire of language. However, if a child appears not to hear what others say to her; if family members and those closest to her find her difficult to understand; or if she is noticeably different in her communicative abilities from those in her age range, adults may want to seek advice from specialists in children's speech, language and hearing.

Teachers can help sustain natural language development by providing environments full of language development opportunities. Here are some general guidelines for teachers, parents, and other caregivers:

- Understand that every child's language or dialect is worthy of respect as a valid system for communication. It reflects the identities, values, and experiences of the child's family and community.
- Treat children as if they are conversationalists, even if they are not yet talking. Children learn very early about how conversations work (taking turns, looking attentively, using facial expressions, etc.) as long as they have experiences with conversing adults.
- Encourage interaction among children. Peer learning is an important part of language development, especially in mixed-age groups. Activities involving a wide range of materials should promote talk. There should be a balance between individual activities and those that nurture collaboration and discussion, such as dramatic play, block-building, book-sharing, or carpentry.
- Remember that parents, caregivers, teachers, and guardians are the chief resources in language development. Children learn much from each other, but adults are the main conversationalists, questioners, listeners, responders, and sustainers of language development and growth in the child-care center or classroom.
- Continue to encourage interaction as children come to understand written language. Children in the primary grades can keep developing oral abilities and skills by consulting with each other, raising questions, and providing information in varied situations. Every area of the curriculum is enhanced through language, so that classrooms full of active learners are hardly ever silent.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Brown, R. *A First Language: The Early Stages.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1973.

Cazden, C.B., ed. *Language in Early Childhood Education.* Washington, DC: NAEYC, 1981.

Fletcher, P., and M. Garman, eds. *Language Acquisition,* 2nd ed. New York: Cambridge, 1986.

Genishi, C. "Children's Language: Learning Words From Experience." *Young Children* 44 (Nov., 1988): 16-23.

Genishi, C., and A. Haas Dyson. *Language Assessment in the Early Years.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1984.

Heath, S.B. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms.* New York: Cambridge, 1983.

Hough, R.A., Nurss, J.R., and D. Wood. "Tell Me a Story: Making Opportunities for Elaborated Language in Early Childhood Classrooms." *Young Children* 43 (Nov., 1987): 6-12.

Lindfors, J.W. *Children's Language and Learning,* 2nd ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1987.

Wells, G. *The Meaning Makers: Children Learning Language and Using Language to Learn.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986.

ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated.

This publication was funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, Department of Education. Opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI.